Google obeys Chinese censors
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GOOGLE'S new Chinese news service omits results from web sites blocked by that country's authorities, raising prickly questions for an online search engine that has famously promised to "do no evil". Dynamic Internet Technology, a research firm striving to defeat online censorship, conducted tests that found Google omits results from the government-banned sites if search requests are made through computers connecting to the internet in China.

Steered by an identical search request, computers with a United States connection retrieved results from the sites blocked by China.

"That's a problem because the Chinese people need to know there are alternative opinions from the Chinese government and there are many things being covered up by the government," said Bill Xia, Dynamic's chief executive. "Users expect Google to return anything on the internet. That's what a search engine does."

Mr Xia said he suspected Google was cooperating with the Chinese government's censorship efforts to smooth the way for expansion plans that could help company boost future profits.

The Chinese government lashed out at Google two years ago when it temporarily blocked access to the company's main search engine before relenting under public pressure.

Google acknowledges its Chinese language news service - introduced on a test basis two weeks ago - is leaving out results from government-banned sites, but the company believes the omissions fit with its long-standing mission to make its search engine efficient and useful.

If Google were to display results from sites the Chinese government blocks, computer users would end up clicking on links that lead nowhere - something the search engine has always tried to avoid.

"Google has decided that in order to create the best possible search experience for our mainland China users we will not include sites whose content is not accessible," company spokeswoman Debbie Frost said.

Only a "tiny fraction" of web sites are being excluded by the Chinese news service, Ms Frost said. Mr Xia said his tests indicated Google is excluding Chinese results from at least eight sites, including www.epochtimes.com <http://www.epochtimes.com> and www.voanews.com <HTTP://www.voanews.com>.

Google says the Chinese news service draws upon roughly 1,000 sites - a broader array than in Germany, which trolls 700 sites, and Italy, which monitors about 250 sites.

"It's probably killing them to leave some (Chinese) sites out of its index, but they have probably decided they are doing greater good by providing access to all these other sites," said Forrester Research analyst Charlene Li.
Complaints about Google's search results aren't new. As its search engine has become more popular in recent years, Google has drawn fire for displaying some results too prominently and downplaying others. Some organisations also have lodged complaints about the company's policies governing the kinds of ads it will accept.

Google's pledge to "do no evil" - trumpeted loudly by company co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin - is spurring even greater scrutiny of company behaviour. If it wanted to take a political stand, Google could consider posting a disclaimer on the Chinese news site advising visitors the search results may be affected by government censorship, Ms Li said.

However, such a step would run the risk of inciting the Chinese government to restrict access to Google's news service. "Doing no evil doesn't necessarily mean Google has to be the progressive cause for change," Ms Li said. "(In China), they are saying, 'This is the law of the land, and there is nothing we can do to change it.'"

*The Associated Press*

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